



April 11, 2023

Testimony to Montgomery County Council

Regarding: the FY 2024 Operating Budget

From: Kit Gage, Advocacy Director

Friends of Sligo Creek, or FOSC, is a nonprofit community organization dedicated to protecting, improving, and appreciating the ecological health of Sligo Creek Park and its surrounding watershed.

We will limit our comments on the Montgomery County budget to issues directly related to the Departments of Environmental Protection and Parks. We associate ourselves with both the Stormwater Partners Network and the MoCo Climate Coalition, more detailed testimony from both which we have signed.

Department of Environmental Protection

We are in general very supportive of the priorities of DEP and in its budget proposal, as reflected in its increased budgets for staff and/or program for:

- 1) Tree planting, which is critical for climate change mitigation
- 2) The RainScapes rebate program, a vastly popular and important way both to help mitigate stormwater issues and increase native plantings which have critical wildlife/pollinator support impacts.
- 3) Illicit discharge detection and elimination, which through our Water WatchDog program, we both help DEP and also educate ourselves and people throughout the watershed to understand the significant and deleterious impact of such discharges and the important work of DEP.

4) In general to improve efforts to - reduce pollutants in waterways, improve water quality, salt management, invasive species, water monitoring effects, forests, clean energy, electrification, sustainable buildings, organic lawn care, and grants management.

MS4 Permit

We strongly agree with the Stormwater Partners Network that DEP can and should in this time of Climate Emergency, exceed its MS4 permit requirements for handling stormwater in an environmentally sensitive fashion.

Water Quality Protection Charge

We agree with the Stormwater Partners Network that to accomplish this in part, the Water Quality Protection Charge should be increased at a somewhat faster rate than proposed. Both the predicted costs of flood management and accelerated rain events we're seeing with Climate Change require more robust funding in the more predictable fashion reflected with budgeting rather than emergency outlays.

Stormwater Waiver Fees

We remain concerned that when entities obtain waivers from handling stormwater on a site, they are not actually paying for the environment and other costs to the community of such waivers. So the fees should be increased to accomplish this and incentivize reduced use of waivers.

Montgomery Parks

As a watershed organization, we work closely on a volunteer basis with Montgomery Parks, largely in Sligo Creek Park. We recognize the extraordinary work Parks does to seek to improve the Park and help mitigate damage to the environment from human and other sources. Parks and specifically forests, are increasingly recognized for their critical function not just for wildlife and current human health but also for the continued functioning of the planet.

Parks proposed budget is just a 4% increase over last year, not the 7% average of the total budget. Parks is not the agency from which just cuts should be taken. At the very least, the budget should be raised to that 7% average of other agencies. At a minimum, Council should fully fund Parks at the rate of inflation, to avoid hiring freezes, limits on critical programs and activities.

In particular, we work with Parks through our Weed Warrior program to address invasive species, and we recommend areas for reforestation, and places where stormwater damage requires mitigation. Tree health requires a robust invasive plant removal effort. Parks, and

even our very diligent and massive volunteer Weed Warrior effort, are not sufficient. Additional funding to add to the Weed Warriors, target particular problem areas, and where possible, replant with native species. Parks' Vegetation Ecology and Management Unit is sorely underfunded – for decades – and should finally receive the 3 FTEs we and Parks recommend to more effectively implement this program.

Parks' stormwater management team does remarkable work to help address the problems it sees, but more funding is needed to do more – and more collaborative work with DEP and DOT will more effectively address the problems by facilitating upstream restoration.

In sum, we very strongly urge the Council to fully fund and even exceed the budget requests of the Department of Environmental Protection and Parks.

Thank you for your consideration.